

## From Hiding to Shining

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“Try not to stand out.” This, for students, is almost like a rule or even a curse. It actually makes sense when we think about animal instincts — if we stand out in a herd, predators may target you. But we are human. Denying our individuality and disguising ourselves, can we really be happy?

Let me share an experience that taught me how painful standing out can be. I belong to the band club and a few months ago, I participated in a contest as a vocalist. After the contest, the organizer uploaded the video of our performance to TikTok. At first, I was excited by the positive comments. But soon, I started receiving abusive comments like “The vocalist looks ugly” and “How does she have the nerve to sing in public?” These comments received hundreds of “like!” and the video reached 200,000 views. I began to feel afraid of the whole world. How could simply being myself upset so many people?

After days of feeling down, I realized a simple truth: we cannot satisfy everyone. We know very well that people are all different. It’s impossible for everyone to feel the same way. So, if we constantly worry about other people’s reactions, we won’t be able to do anything.

Now, you’re probably thinking it’s still terrifying to be criticized. Having experienced online bullying myself, I truly understand your fear, but that’s why I’m telling you: you don’t need to care about the criticisms from people who don’t really know you. Don’t let their standards become the compass of your life.

I once saw this fear of standing out spread in my school. As you know, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we all wore masks and looked the same. In May 2023, we no longer had to wear masks, but in my school, most students continued to wear them. We had never exposed our faces so we were afraid of how others might think about our faces.

Days went by, and another fear began to grow among us: if I remove my

mask, will others think I'm overly confident about my looks or that I can't read the room? Then, summer came, and we couldn't stand wearing masks anymore! It was Japan's extremely hot weather that got us to come to our senses. We finally realized how foolish and unhappy we had been to be ashamed of showing who we were.

This shows that when the fear of standing out spreads too much, we start hiding our true selves to the extent that no one is happy. The only way to break this vicious circle is to be brave and act like us. Once someone breaks out of the shell, a positive cycle will begin, and everyone will feel safe to be honest. If being different becomes normal, difference is no longer a problem.

Which would you choose, hiding who you are, or respecting each other's uniqueness? Like what you like. Wear what you want. Follow your heart. Even if that means standing out, don't worry. People who know you and care about you will accept you just the way you are. And those who criticize you will eventually fade away like ghosts. We are not living for ghosts, right? Embrace yourselves and give others the freedom to be themselves. Let's live the life we love and love the life we live.